

S E C R E T SANAA 002342

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/16/2013

TAGS: PTER ASEC EG YM

SUBJECT: REPORTS OF 9/16 KIDNAPPING OVERSTATED; NO TERRORIST THREAT INDICATED

REF: A. 9/16/03 MISENHEIMER/JONES TELCON

1B. FBIS 161011ZSEP03
1C. FBIS 1611172ZSEP03
1D. FBIS 161153ZSEP03

Classified By: DCM Alan G. Misenheimer for reasons 1.5 (b and d)

¶1. (s/nf) Summary: Post has determined from various ROYG sources, informed journalists and the Egyptian Embassy that 9/16 media reports that an Egyptian diplomat was kidnapped in Sanaa were overstated. While sources provide a range of variant "facts" and posit wildly differing motives for the assailant (including a 1995 arms deal gone awry), the 9/16 incident does not/not appear to presage any heightened threat to Americans or other diplomats, nor to herald a return to the long-gone bad old days of tribal kidnappings in Yemen. Notably, the 9/16 episode has no visible connection with the GOE's detention of Hillah. End summary.

¶2. (s/nf) On September 16 Reuters reported that an Egyptian diplomat, possibly the Military Attach, was kidnapped by 3 or 4 armed Yemeni tribesmen from a car with Egyptian mission diplomatic plates, but was released after a police chase (refs b-d). Post immediately sought details from police and security authorities as well as informed journalists and the Egyptian Embassy. Journalists' reflexive (but unsubstantiated) assumption that this was a tribal kidnapping by the Beni Hosheish calculated to press the GOE to release Hillah shaped initial reporting, but subsequently proved to be untrue.

¶3. (c) Yemeni police and security sources played down the incident from the outset, and Embassy's eventual success in contacting the Egyptian MilAtt himself (who denied that he or any of his colleagues had been kidnapped) during the evening of 9/16 confirmed that the lurid initial published reports were distorted.

¶4. (c) Early on 9/17 the official Saba news agency carried an account of the "kidnapping" that proved only vaguely consistent with divergent accounts provided to Embassy Sanaa by other sources during the day. While Saba held that an Egyptian embassy driver was kidnapped by individuals hoping to press the GOE on an unspecified financial dispute, police sources told Embassy contacts the incident consisted of an attempted kidnapping by a single assailant. A journalist connected with the Presidency stood by the kidnapping account, adding that the perpetrators were tribal elements from Shabwa province. A top security official provided a variant story and added carjacking as another motivation of the perpetrator.

¶5. (s/nf) Also on 9/17, Pol/Econ Chief met with Egyptian Political Counselor Hossam el-Din Salama, who characterized the incident as "harassment" rather than kidnapping, and added arms trafficking as another angle. Salama said that in 1995 a Yemeni named Ali Mansour purchased arms from Bulgaria for shipment to Yemen via Egypt. The weapons were reportedly seized in Egypt because of a "lack of paperwork." According to Salama, within the last week Mansour contacted the Egyptian Military Attach to complain about the situation and was told to work through the Yemeni Ministry of Defense. Salama played down the 9/16 incident, but was evasive on exactly what Mansour had done, and on whether he acted alone or with tribal accomplices.

¶6. (s/nf) Comment: Despite the varying accounts of the story, all sources agree on facts central to U.S. interests and security of Embassy Sanaa personnel: (a) There is no/no indication of a link between the 9/16 incident and Hillah; (b) There is no/no reason to believe the incident was ideologically motivated; and (c) there is no evidence of a heightened general threat of kidnapping (tribal or otherwise) against Egyptian, American or other diplomats in Yemen. Nevertheless, post will continue to pluck at the disparate strands of the story, and a scheduled courtesy call on Ambassador next week by the new Egyptian Ambassador may offer further insights.

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